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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR SWANEE HUNT ENCOURAGES
LEBANESE WOMEN TO ENTER THE POLITICAL ARENA

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) In a visit to Beirut, former U.S. Ambassador and Harvard University John F. Kennedy school professor, Swane Hunt, met with a cross-section of talented and successful Lebanese women active in business, civil society and politics. Although she recognized the importance of the current role of Lebanese women in all fields, she stressed the need to increase women's presence in the political arena and encouraged Lebanese women to run for office. Immediately after meeting and listening to Hunt's empowering lectures, several Lebanese women began putting her message into concrete ideas for action. End Summary.

HUNT MEETS WITH LEBANESE WOMEN ACTIVE IN
BUSINESS, POLITICS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

¶12. (SBU) During her brief visit to Beirut on June 19-21, former U.S. Ambassador Swane Hunt met with a number of Lebanese women active in business, politics, and civil society. This included participants of the upcoming MEPI Women Political Leaders program and other MEPI-funded programs, the State Department co-sponsored 2007 Women in Business Summit, FORTUNE/State Department/Vital Voices mentorship program, as well as members of the Legal and Business Fellowship Program (LBFP), and local organizations such as the Lebanese League of Women in Business (LLWB), and the Arab Women's Legal Network (AWLN) Lebanon Hub. (Note: Some LLWB and AWLN members have attended USG-sponsored training. End note.) All the participants were impressed by Hunt's wide-ranging experience as a diplomat, professor, politician, prolific writer, composer, photographer, specialist in women's issues, and advocate for social change, gender parity, and the alleviation of poverty.

"LET WOMEN RULE" IS MAIN
FOCUS OF HUNT'S MESSAGE

¶13. (SBU) Throughout the day on June 20, Hunt combined a formal presentation entitled "Let Women Rule," which she presented at the Lebanese American University's (LAU) Women Studies' Department, with informal talks and conversations at a coffee discussion event hosted by Charge Sison and a lunch that gathered around 25 prominent Lebanese business women. At each event, Hunt highlighted the importance and need for greater female involvement in society and gave a number of examples from her own experience showing how the role of women had improved outcomes, for example in conflict resolution.

¶14. (SBU) However, Hunt's main message revolved around the minimal female presence in world politics, the reasons that pushed women

away from politics and more into civil society and NGO work, and ways to encourage greater female involvement in the political arena.

Regarding the specific case of Lebanon, some women raised the need to amend existing legislation that discriminates against women (such as the inability of Lebanese mothers to grant Lebanese citizenship to their children) and ways to impact mostly male legislators. Hunt reasserted that such laws cannot be properly amended unless women participated in public policy making, thus the need to get a greater number of women elected to parliament.

¶15. (SBU) Regarding the current debate on electoral reform in Lebanon and the proposed electoral quota for women, Hunt mentioned that 97 countries in the world have a gender quota for parliamentary elections. And although she echoed many women's opposition to such a quota, including Lebanese women, Hunt pointed out that there is no country with more than 25 percent female participation in parliament that does not have a gender quota. Therefore, Hunt strongly encouraged Lebanese women to run for office and to create groups in support of these candidates.

¶16. (U) Hunt further emphasized her message during an exclusive interview with English-language newspaper The Daily Star on June 20.

In it, Hunt expressed her optimism that gender reform in Lebanon could be brought about by even a small number of organized women. She called on women to "force" their way into the political system, because the system will not welcome them in.

OTHER WAYS OF EMPOWERING WOMEN ALSO DISCUSSED

¶17. (SBU) Hunt also discussed other areas for empowering women,

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including ways for Lebanese women to get a better education, thus increasing and improving job opportunities, which would in turn allow greater female autonomy. She encouraged women to always aim high, whatever their objective, warning that they would "run out of time" if they waited for the political and societal environment to change before taking action. She also recommended that women send a flow of editorials on a daily basis to create public awareness of the positive impact of women in parliament and gain support for fundraising and votes.

NEW SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT IMMEDIATELY TRANSLATED INTO CONCRETE IDEAS FOR ACTION

¶18. (SBU) Immediately after meeting with Hunt at the Charge's residence, one of the participants submitted a draft proposal for the group to form a "women's coalition" to empower women in politics. One of its first objectives would be to call for a 53 percent women quota in the voting ballot.

¶19. (SBU) Meanwhile, the most recent participant of the 2008 FORTUNE/State Department/Vital Voices mentorship program told us that she was planning to set up a Middle East Mentoring program, an NGO that would tap top women managers and university graduates in the Middle East and match the latter for training with top women managers.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Hunt's visit helped draw attention to the important role that Lebanese women already play in society, while motivating them to do more, as demonstrated by the immediate and overwhelmingly positive reaction to her presentations. Embassy has already followed up by setting up an e-mail exchange with the participants, and will continue to reach out to them in an effort to promote more political activism from a potentially very powerful group of prominent Lebanese women.

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